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MARX'S
“CIVIL WAR IN FRANCE”



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Karl Marx's *The Civil War in France* is not a voluminous work; it occupies some sixty-odd printed pages. The time spent on its writing was not lengthy either, being about equal to the time for which the Paris Commune endured. Nonetheless, *The Civil War in France* occupies a position of importance and honour in the treasure-house of Marxist theoretical thought.

Marx considered the actions of the broad popular masses to be one of the prime movers in historical development. Such actions take on particular significance at times when radical shifts and changes are going on in society, when major revolutionary shocks are being felt. Marx regarded the experience accumulated by the working people in their mass actions as material of the highest value for the development of the theory of proletarian revolution. A vast portion of his writings is devoted to the analysis of such experience. The approach is always highly concrete. Marx never regarded the people—the protagonist in any revolution—as an abstract, homogeneous mass. In each individual case, he clearly perceived the deployment of class forces, and also the level of development attained by each class and its role and place in society. In the words of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, "Marx's method consists, first of all, in taking due account of the *objective* content of a historical process... in definite and concrete conditions."¹ Marx always had

¹ V. I. Lenin, "Under a False Flag", *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p. 143.

a clear idea of the objective and subjective causes behind the mass movement under consideration and of the practical aims that shaped it.

It was the bourgeoisie that reaped the principal benefits from the revolutionary activities of the popular masses in the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth. This was so because the main goal of bourgeois revolutions is to do away with the remnants of feudal society, which hinder progress. Up to a certain time, this corresponded to the interests of most working people as well, and thus the bourgeoisie was legitimately able to assume leadership in anti-feudal revolutionary movements.

At the same time as the bourgeoisie was gathering influence and power, however, the antagonist destined to vanquish it—the working class—was also growing stronger. Working people were no longer content with the slogans of the bourgeoisie, which were still being proclaimed in the name of society as a whole. At the time of the European revolutions of 1848-1849, the proletariat came forward with its own demands. The most memorable example was the rising of workers in Paris in June of 1848. For three days the red banner waved on the barricades in the French capital. For three days the workers of the Paris suburbs fought to the death against heavily armed, superior forces. The first battle of the French proletariat against capitalist society ended in defeat for the workers. The enraged bourgeoisie inflicted fierce repressions as vengeance for the fright it had suffered. Thousands of the rebels were summarily shot, sent off to hard labour, or condemned to an early death from tropical fevers in overseas French colonies. In the memory of the international proletariat, the June rebellion remained as a prologue to the Paris Commune.

From this moment on, Marx regarded studying the practical experience of the working class and building generalisations on it as one of his most important theoretical aims. He drew lessons for the future from the pro-

letariat's defeats no less than from its victories. Marx's theory was not the result of abstract thought, but of generalisation and painstaking analysis of reality, of the development of the class struggle. This was the principal reason for its profoundly scientific character. Lenin wrote: "There is no trace of utopianism in Marx, in the sense that he made up or invented a 'new' society. No, he studied the *birth* of the new society *out of* the old, and the forms of transition from the latter to the former, as a natural-historical process. He examined the actual experience of a mass proletarian movement and tried to draw practical lessons from it. He 'learned' from the Commune, just as all the great revolutionary thinkers learned unhesitatingly from the experience of great movements of the oppressed classes."¹

The Paris Commune gave Marx a unique opportunity to witness at first hand the rise, development, and defeat of the first proletarian revolution in history, and the only one in the nineteenth century. The main object of his study *The Civil War in France* was the activities of the aroused revolutionary masses of Paris, headed by the working class. Marx followed these activities with great interest and undisguised admiration. He paid particular attention to the Parisians' spontaneous efforts to organise themselves in their struggle for the further development of the revolution. While giving due regard to revolutionary enthusiasm and the selflessness of the working people of Paris, he was far from overestimating the part that such unpremeditated outbreaks by the popular masses play in the class struggle. The tragedy of the Communards showed what enormous significance organisational and ideological unity in the ranks of the proletariat has for its victory. This unity can be provided only by a cohesive proletarian party, armed with a scientific theory.

¹ V. I. Lenin, "The State and Revolution", *Collected Works*, Vol. 25, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p. 430.

For Marx, the Paris Commune was more than just confirmation of one of his central theses, the dictatorship of the proletariat. In *The Civil War in France* he showed that the dictatorship of the proletariat is not a speculative construct born in the quiet studies of theorising scholars, but a predictable result of the revolutionary creativity of the broad proletarian masses. In the two months it existed the working-class government in Paris convincingly demonstrated the truth of Marx's idea that the power of the proletariat organically expresses the interests of all the exploited.

As if foreseeing the attempts later made by falsifiers of the theory of proletarian revolution to advance a distorted concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat and frighten ordinary people with the horrors of a dictatorial totalitarian regime maintained by a narrow group of professional revolutionaries, Marx presented, in *The Civil War in France*, irrefutable facts by which he showed that the emergence of the working class as the dominant force in society marks a new and higher stage in the development of democracy, in which democracy for the chosen few becomes democracy for the majority. The idea of transforming the power of the state from a weapon used by a few exploiters to oppress and hold down the popular masses into an instrument for the political and economic liberation of the people is one of the keystones of *The Civil War in France*.

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The renowned work by Marx being considered here, like any other scientific treatise, should be approached concretely and historically. This means that the work as a whole, the tasks it sets for itself, its significance, and the individual problems it deals with are to be considered from the standpoint of the historical conditions, place, and time in which it was written. It is especially important to take into consideration the overall histor-

ical situation, the proletariat's level of organisation and self-awareness at that time, the state of the working-class movement in Europe and in France, and the degree of development and forms of the class struggle. Such an approach makes it possible to comprehend more deeply the purposes of Marx's work, its distinctive features and significance, and to arrive at a fuller interpretation of the ideas put forward and vindicated in it.

An acquaintance with other landmarks of Marxist theory, such as *The Class Struggles in France* and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, is of considerable help in understanding *The Civil War in France* more fully and deeply. In these works Marx showed the class basis of the regime of Napoleon III, revealed its adventurist character, and foretold the inevitable downfall of the empire of "the little nephew of a great uncle".

In order to see yet again the accuracy of prediction characteristic of Marx's thought, we may turn to the "Address of the Central Authority to the League" written by Marx and Engels in March of 1850. In this document the founders of scientific communism, in working out the tactics of the proletariat in a bourgeois revolution, anticipated the forms of working-class organisation in the course of a revolutionary struggle that were spontaneously created twenty years later by the working people of Paris.

The conclusions at which Marx arrived in *The Civil War in France* were further developed in the works of Engels and Lenin, especially in *The Housing Question* and *On Authority*, written by Engels in 1873, and in his introduction to the third German edition of *The Civil War in France*. Great benefit is undoubtedly to be derived from studying the method Lenin used in his work with *The Civil War in France* while preparing to write *The State and Revolution*.

CHAPTER I

On July 19, 1870, France declared war on Prussia. The *casus belli* was a dispute over the vacant throne of Spain. A bourgeois revolution had begun in Spain in 1868, and Queen Isabella II had fled the country. The Constituent Cortes (assembly) that met in February of 1869 adopted a constitution retaining the monarchy in Spain, and the provisional government began looking around for a new king. Leopold von Hohenzollern, a prince related to the ruling dynasty of Prussia, was offered the crown and accepted, but the French government vigorously opposed his candidacy. The rulers of the Second Empire viewed the situation as a convenient excuse for bringing about an international crisis and provoking an armed conflict. The Prussian government sought the same end, and with equal energy.

The causes for this militant hostility were, of course, far more serious than the question of who would inherit the Spanish throne. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, the process by which centralised bourgeois national governments were formed in Europe was reaching completion. The ruling groups in the European countries strove to prevent this problem from being solved from below, through popular revolutions. They preferred to achieve national unity by redistributing power within the exploiter classes, through dynastic wars. In this the ruling elite of Prussia was no exception.

Prince Otto von Bismarck, a representative of the reactionary landowners, had become head of the Prussian

government in 1862. He was one of the outstanding political leaders of his time. Possessed of an exceptional intellect and a will of iron, he was completely unscrupulous in attaining his ends, of which he declared the unification of Germany through "blood and iron" to be the greatest. Victories in wars against Denmark (1864) and Austria (1866) ensured Prussia's leadership in the struggle to unify the country. The North German Confederation was established in 1867, at Bismarck's initiative; it included twenty-two German states. Prussia naturally played the dominant role in its governing bodies.

By 1870, only one obstacle remained in the way of unifying Germany under the aegis of the Hohenzollerns (the ruling dynasty of Prussia): the Second Empire of Napoleon III. The French ruler had been of considerable help to the Prussian government in its quest for hegemony over the German lands, and Bismarck had learned a good deal from his crafty and treacherous neighbour. But, by the beginning of the seventies, the days of unclouded relations between the two chief European predators were long past. The leaders of the Second Empire saw the final unification of Germany as a serious threat to themselves. They were not at all pleased by the appearance of a strong, centralised state on France's northern border.

Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, the nephew of Napoleon I, had come to power on December 2, 1851, as the result of a coup. The Second Empire had its chief social support among the well-to-do peasantry. It also had the active support of the Catholic clergy and the French military. In essence, however, the regime of Louis Bonaparte was an expression of the interests of the bourgeoisie controlling high finance. The power of the banks increased rapidly under it, and the Paris stock market became one of the most important financial centres in Europe. Capital began to be exported. Napoleon III and his associates resorted to the most shameless

social demagoguery in order to tighten their grip on power, trying to make it seem that the Second Empire stood above parties and classes, that it defended the interests of the whole French people. In actual fact, Louis Bonaparte put the finishing touches to a monstrous governmental apparatus for repression and did away with most of the democratic gains made in earlier years. All revolutionary and working-class organisations were mercilessly persecuted.

The ruling elite of the Second Empire proved incapable of resolving the acute class conflicts. While the big-business bourgeoisie grew richer, the masses of working people were reduced to destitution. The exploitation of workers became more galling, and the increase in large-scale production hastened the ruin of tradesmen and small shop owners. Most of the peasantry had too little land, and suffered from high taxes, and browbeating by the police. The venality of civil servants reached unprecedented proportions; the Emperor himself sanctioned and was involved in many financial schemes.

In an attempt to distract the masses from problems within the country, Napoleon III pursued continual predatory and colonial wars. Many of these costly ventures ended in disgraceful failures. Relations between France and most of her European neighbours suffered serious damage. By the end of the sixties, the Second Empire was unmistakably in crisis. There were miscarriages in foreign policy, and at the same time class conflicts within the country became more acute. The anti-Bonapartists grew more numerous and powerful. The French government hoped to avert the oncoming political catastrophe by rushing into yet another military adventure. It was not long before a suitable occasion turned up.

The ruling classes in France and Germany were also hoping that an armed conflict could be used to emasculate the working-class movement, the growth of which was causing serious concern among reactionaries throughout Europe.

The European bourgeoisie saw the First International as the greatest threat. The International Working Men's Association (as the organisation was officially known) was founded on September 28, 1864, at an international meeting convened in London by British and French workers. Representatives of the Polish, Italian, and German proletariat also took part. Among those present was Karl Marx.

At the first meeting Marx was elected to membership in the General Council; it was he who composed the founding documents of the first international mass organisation of the proletariat. He and Engels (who began to participate actively in the work of the International soon after) exerted an enormous influence on the development of the International Working Men's Association. Its headquarters were set up in London, which at that time offered the most bearable conditions for various types of democratic and working-class organisations. The headquarters had ties with local sections in other countries, which often arose on the basis of existing working-class groups.

The principal task of the International was to develop a sense of proletarian internationalism in the workers of different countries. There was a need to help the proletariat in Europe and the USA realise its common interests, to teach it to think of itself as a single whole and act as such.

To achieve this, the programmatic documents of the International Working Men's Association formulated the organisation's basic demands in a way that would be acceptable to workers with different views and theoretical backgrounds. At the same time, however, Marx and Engels were striving to imbue the consciousness of the proletariat's most advanced members with the fundamentals of scientific communism. The principles of Marxist theory were upheld in a hard struggle against the adherents of petty-bourgeois trends within the working-class movement: the reformists and the follow-

ers of the anarchist theoreticians Proudhon and Bakunin. It was life itself that arbitrated the dispute between Marxism and the socialist doctrines that opposed it. The influence of a given theoretical conception was determined by its ability to supply a correct answer to the urgent questions that the unfolding class struggle put before the international proletariat.

The practical work of the International Working Men's Association was of great significance in the revolutionary education of the proletariat. Solidarity between various contingents of the working class in Europe and the USA was forged during its actions in support of the strike movement. The participation of the International in the general democratic campaigns of that time (giving support to the Polish and Irish peoples in their fight for independence, and opposing interference by the British government in the American Civil War) helped the more advanced workers to understand the close connection between the proletariat's class struggle and the solution of current democratic and national problems. Many of the leaders of the working-class movement educated in the ranks of the International Working Men's Association went on to play an important role in creating national proletarian parties.

The activities of the First International provoked fear and hatred among all of the international bourgeoisie and in reactionary circles. In the imagination of the bourgeois frightened by the "red menace", the International was a monstrous octopus enveloping the whole world, the instigator of most disturbances and troubles. Ideas about the power of the International Working Men's Association were often overblown, and officialdom helped to fan the flames. In an attempt to justify repressive measures against the working-class movement, the governments of several European countries declared that the International was a secret conspiratorial society, guided by the sinister London centre headed by Marx. The bourgeois and reactionary press of Europe seized

on these fabrications and elaborated them in every possible way. The persecution that resulted from these horror stories was perfectly tangible: members of the International Working Men's Association were refused jobs, organisations in Germany were threatened with disbandment for allying themselves with it, and in Austria-Hungary and France legal actions were brought against local sections of the International.

The policy of Napoleon III on the labour issue was characteristically contradictory, demagogic, and reactionary. He flirted with the French proletariat and posed as a defender of working people's interests. This was the purpose behind certain measures adopted by the government of the Second Empire in the sixties. The law forbidding strikes was repealed; public meetings were permitted (although with severe restrictions); *syndicats* (professional organisations) were legalised; and police censorship of the press was relaxed somewhat. But these half-measures could not halt the growth of the working-class movement in the country. Once they saw that their attempt to bring the proletariat to heel had failed, the French ruling elite resorted once again to overt repression, aimed principally at the country's sections of the International Working Men's Association.

The first sections had appeared in 1864; several years later, they had become a real political force. The government of Louis Bonaparte was particularly worried by the ties between French members of the International and the working-class movement in other European countries, and their part in organising the strike movement. It was also frightened by the increasingly revolutionary mood in the ranks of the French sections of the International Working Men's Association. The moderate followers of Proudhon, a petty-bourgeois socialist theoretician who called for a peaceful, utopian solution of the conflict between capital and labour, were replaced by new people who moved further and further away from Proudhon's basic dogmas, even though they con-

tinued to consider themselves his disciples. They set aside reverence for private property and faith in the magical power of the co-operative movement and took an active part in creating professional organisations and directing strikes; they entirely rejected the Napoleonic regime and were ready to enter into overt opposition to it. A number of the future leaders of the Paris Commune, such as Eugène Varlin, a bookbinder who became one of its heroes and martyrs, began to play a prominent role in the Paris sections of the International at this time.

The government of the Second Empire subjected the French organisations of the International Working Men's Association to policy persecution. In 1868, two legal actions were brought against leading figures in the International in Paris. They were fined and sentenced to prison. The sections of the International Working Men's Association were declared disbanded. They went underground, but did not abandon their activities. In the summer of 1870, legal action against the International was taken for a third time. Thirty-eight persons were accused, and the sentence was passed two weeks before the start of the Franco-Prussian war.

The fears of the international bourgeoisie proved well grounded. The results of the work done by the International Working Men's Association made themselves felt in the very first days of the war. Both in France and in Germany, the vanguard of the proletariat declared unanimous opposition to the blood-letting and spurned the feelings of national hatred being promoted by chauvinists.

The General Council of the First International issued an address, written by Karl Marx, to all the Association's members. It declared that the aims of the fratricidal Franco-Prussian War unleashed by Napoleon III were contrary to the interests of the French proletariat. Marx pointed out that Louis Bonaparte and his associates needed the war to keep them in power and said

that the "war plot of July, 1870" was "an amended edition of the *coup d'état* of December, 1851".¹ He continued prophetically: "Whatever may be the incidents of Louis Bonaparte's war with Prussia, the death knell of the Second Empire has already sounded at Paris. It will end as it began, by a parody."² While noting that the war, in its present stage, was a defensive one for Germany, Marx noted at the same time that it was "the governments and the ruling classes of Europe who enabled Louis Bonaparte to play during eighteen years the ferocious farce of the *Restored Empire*".³ The contribution of the Prussian ruling circles had been especially great. Marx called on German workers to keep the conflict with France from turning into a predatory war of conquest.

Marx welcomed the courageous opposition to the war by representatives of the International in France and Germany. In the name of the British proletariat, he expressed the deep conviction that "whatever turn the impending horrid war may take, the alliance of the working classes of all countries will ultimately kill war".⁴ For Marx the feelings of proletarian solidarity and internationalism that were manifested in France and Germany were a "great fact" that "opens the vista of a brighter future. It proves that in contrast to old society, with its economical miseries and its political delirium, a new society is springing up, whose international rule will be *peace*, because its national ruler will be everywhere the same—*Labour*!"⁵ Events confirmed the correctness of the basic appraisals and conclusions of this add-

1 "First Address of the International Working Men's Association on the Franco-Prussian War", *The General Council of the First International, 1870-1871*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1974, p. 324.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 325.

3 See *ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*, p. 328.

5 *Ibid.*

ress. The very first battles showed the German forces to be greatly superior. The disintegration of the Second Empire's police apparatus and bureaucracy was mirrored in the utter unpreparedness for combat of the French army.

France entered the war practically without allies. The mobilisation was very poorly conducted, and the confusion was increased by the failure of railways to operate properly and by disarray among the various commands. As a result, the French army was unable to achieve sufficient troop concentration at the border for the opening of the war. The units mobilised were not adequately equipped. The Second Empire's war ministry, which had made preparations for action in Germany, had not even bothered to provide the officers with maps of French territory. Louis Napoleon's soldiers were armed with Chassepot rifles, which were technically superior to the weapons of the German army, but most of the French infantry had not been trained in the use of these modern firearms. The artillery that the French put into the field was significantly inferior to that of the Prussians. The German army, by making use of the weakness and oversights of the enemy, was able to secure a decisive numerical advantage in the main theatres of war.

Despite their undoubted courage, the French forces, under the command of incompetent Bonapartist generals, suffered one defeat after another. At the end of August 1870, the main force of the French army was soundly beaten and surrounded at the fortress of Sedan. On September 2, 83,000 French soldiers, with the Emperor himself at their head, surrendered. The way to the French capital was now open to the German forces.

The news of the capitulation of the Emperor's forces had no sooner reached Paris than Louis Bonaparte's Second Empire was overthrown by a revolution (September 4, 1870). The people demanded that a republic (the third in the history of France) be proclaimed. But

the German forces continued to advance. There had now been a reversal of roles: republican France was struggling against an aggressor that threatened its very existence. The vanguard of the working class and of the democratically-minded public in Europe and the USA condemned the Prussian aggression, and demanded that a just peace be concluded with republican France. The General Council of the First International, in its second address on the Franco-Prussian War, called on the proletariat to give its full support to this demand. The appeal was written by Marx. He pointed out that Germany's war of defence had come to a close with "the surrender of Louis Bonaparte, the Sedan capitulation, and the proclamation of the Republic of Paris",¹ and went on to a devastating critique of the annexationist plans cherished by Germany's rulers. Marx showed that there was no basis for the claims of German chauvinists that certain French territories must be taken over to ensure the military security of the German state. "If limits are to be fixed by military interests," he wrote, "there will be no end to claims, because every military line is necessarily faulty, and may be improved by annexing some more outlying territory".² He insightfully perceived that the flagrant robbery of the French people committed by Germany's ruling classes, drunk with their own impunity, would be the source of future wars in Europe. "History will measure its retribution, not by the extent of the square miles conquered from France," he warned, "but by the intensity of the crime of reviving, in the second half of the 19th century, the policy of conquest!"³

The appeal defined the tactics to be adopted by German and French workers in the new situation that arose after the downfall of the monarchy of Napoleon III. For the German proletariat, this meant working to end

¹ Ibid., p. 333.

² Ibid., p. 336.

³ Ibid., p. 337.

the war. Marx expressed the hope that "the German working class are not made of the same malleable stuff as the German middle class. They will do their duty".¹ The appeal laid special emphasis on the complexity of the situation in which the French proletariat now found itself. For the workers of France, the main task was to defend their motherland against the enemy at the gates of Paris. At the same time, Marx warned them of the dangers of falling victim to chauvinist propaganda, of being influenced by nationalistic traditions. He called on the French working class "not to recapitulate the past, but to build up the future".²

The first and second addresses of the General Council on the Franco-Prussian War constitute a sort of introduction to *The Civil War in France*. It was with good reason that Engels, preparing a third, commemorative German edition of Marx's celebrated work in 1891, included the two addresses along with it. He wrote in his introduction that the two addresses, like *The Civil War in France*, are "outstanding examples of the author's remarkable gift for grasping clearly the character, the import and the necessary consequences of great historical events, at a time when these events are still in progress before our eyes or have only just taken place".³

It was the people of Paris who brought about the revolution of September 4, 1870. But it was not able to enjoy the fruits of its victory. The proletariat of Paris—the only existing force that could have gathered the rest of the working people together in a struggle for power—proved incapable of accomplishing this at the critical moment. This was the consequence of the chauvinism of the early days of the war, and of a serious lack of or-

ganisation. There was no group in Paris ready to head up the revolutionary masses of the city or to point out to them the chief goals and the means for their achievement. The Paris sections of the First International, weakened by the repressive measures of the last few months of the Second Empire and by serious disagreements within its own ranks, were unable to do it either.

The power in Paris fell into the hands of protégés of the big-money bourgeoisie. Playing deftly on the critical state of the country (the enemy was approaching the capital), they set up a so-called Government of National Defence. This government, which Marx described as consisting "partly of notorious Orleanists (members of one of France's monarchist factions, supporters of the Orléans branch of the Valois and Bourbon dynasties that once ruled in France), partly of middle-class Republicans", had "inherited from the Empire, not only ruins, but also its dread of the working class".¹ It was this fear that pushed the French ruling classes into outright betrayal of the national interest. While talking about "defending the motherland", the government was secretly moving towards capitulation. The popular masses of Paris, while knowing nothing of these intrigues, had an instinctive distrust of the authorities. All of their energies were devoted to organising a more effective resistance to the aggressors. The German forces reached the city's fortifications. The siege of Paris began on September 19, 1870. It lasted more than four months. Beginning in late December, the city came under heavy bombardment from German artillery. General Trochu, the head of the Government of National Defence and the military governor of Paris, and also his ministers did all they could to inculcate the idea that it was impossible for Paris to resist any longer.

¹ "Second Address of the International Working Men's Association on the Franco-Prussian War", *The General Council of the First International. 1870-1871*, p. 340.

¹ Ibid., p. 340.

² Ibid., p. 341.

³ Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*, Introduction by Frederick Engels, in: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* in three volumes, Vol. 2, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p. 178.

In addition to regular troops, there were sixty battalions of the National Guard defending Paris. They had been recruited in the days of the Second Empire from among the well-to-do citizens. The Government of National Defence was forced by popular pressure to allow the formation of 200 more battalions, which were made up mainly of Parisian workers. For the military command in Paris, working people organised and armed were an object of hatred and fear. The workers' battalions in the National Guard were not supplied with arms and ammunition, and were intentionally thrown into actions doomed to failure. Former Bonapartist officers were put in command of them in the place of their own chosen leaders.

The government did not concern itself with supplying the population of the besieged capital with fuel and foodstuffs. The factories and workshops stood idle. The smaller shops closed. Unemployment increased. Long queues formed outside bread stores long before dawn. Horse meat became a delicacy at the city markets; the meat of cats, dogs, and even rats was also sold. And in the midst of this sea of grief, deprivation, and poverty the money-bags continued to feast as usual in expensive restaurants, where tightly drawn curtains concealed them from public view. The siege brought them no hardships whatever. Indignation at the treachery of the bourgeois elite was growing in the working-class districts of the city. The sabotage of the defence by the government and its generals could not be concealed from the people of Paris. To combat it successfully, the masses needed to unite and organise; this had not yet been achieved by September 4, 1870. But the working people of Paris, with the proletariat at their head, had the revolution to inspire them; a brilliant flash of intuition showed them the way to victory. Mass organisation was being accomplished in the period between September 1870 and March 18, 1871. Vigilance committees were set up in each district of the city. Their mission was to

supervise the actions of the authorities and to prevent any sabotage of the defence. There was also a Central Committee, which was made up of representatives from each of the twenty districts. Numerous clubs openly opposing the government were also formed.

Although the Parisian sections of the International proved incapable of heading up the revolutionary movement in the city, they played a very important role in it. Members of the International Working Men's Association took an active part in the creation and the work of most of the mass organisations in Paris. The building in La Corderie Square where the Federal Council of the Paris sections of the International met became one of the chief revolutionary centres of the French capital. It became headquarters for the city's trade unions, and was also the meeting-place of the Central Committee of the Twenty Districts.

The responsibility of leading the working people of Paris in their fight against reaction fell to the National Guard. This popular army achieved still greater unity in the course of the struggle against the government's attempts to gain control of it. Its military cohesion was amplified by political solidarity in the early days of March 1871, when the Federation of the National Guard was established. Its Central Committee, which was to lead the resistance of the working masses against attempts to bring about a counter-revolution, was set up just a few days before the revolution of March 18, 1871.

The social aspirations of the working people of Paris found expression in the demand for the election of a municipal council, the Paris Commune. The French capital had been deprived of its self-government under Napoleon I, who well remembered the revolutionary Commune of the days of the bourgeois French revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. The centralisation of government power in a police and bureaucratic apparatus reached its peak under the Second Empire.

For the broad masses, however, the Commune meant something more than hope that the city's communal freedoms might be restored. They expected it to bring about radical changes in the social structure, even if they had as yet no very clear idea of what those changes might be. Two times, on October 31, 1870, and on January 22, 1871, the working people of Paris tried to achieve by force the satisfaction of their chief demand. They were kept from success by their lack of cohesiveness and their weak organisation.

The growth of revolutionary feeling among the people of Paris frightened the French ruling classes. They hastened to make peace with Germany; a treaty was signed on January 28, 1871.

In February of 1871, elections for the country's National Assembly were held. Their result was determined by a number of objective factors. In the northern departments, the elections took place under the control of the German occupying forces. The peasantry, which made up most of the French population, was strongly influenced by the provincial bureaucracy and the clergy. The revolutionary ideas of Paris did not reach the rest of France, as the capital was isolated by the enemy blockade. The reactionaries made good use of the masses' disappointment at the loss of the war and their natural desire for peace. As a result, most of the National Assembly was made up of monarchists of all stripes, representatives of the so-called rustic faction, which embodied everything that was stagnant and conservative in French society. The government they formed was headed by Adolph Thiers, one of the most malicious and persistent enemies of the working class.

The preliminary peace agreement between France and Germany was signed on February 26, 1871, in Versailles. France conceded the greater part of Alsace and Lorraine to the victor, and agreed to pay a war indemnity of five thousand million francs. German forces were to remain on French territory until the ratification of

the treaty by the National Assembly.

Now the French ruling circles could set about their main task: subduing revolutionary Paris. The Thiers government, on Bismarck's advice, tried to provoke the Parisians into armed action, which would then be ruthlessly suppressed. But the working people of the city retained their self-possession in the face of every attempt to do this. Then, in the early hours of March 18, 1871, regular troops made an effort to disarm the Parisian National Guard. Its artillery, which had been purchased with money contributed by the citizens themselves, was to be seized first. The working people of the capital had installed cannon on high ground commanding the city: Montmartre, Belleville, and Chaumont. The arms of the National Guardsmen were a serious threat to the plans of the reactionaries.

Sometime after two in the morning, the government's non-commissioned officers, without sounding any alarm, assembled their units. Columns of soldiers marched through the sleeping streets to the designated points of attack. Thiers's forces captured the cannon on Montmartre without any great difficulty, but were not able to remove them from the working-class districts of the city quickly enough. At dawn the inhabitants—mainly women who had set out to shop—began to crowd around the soldiers. The alarm was sounded. National Guardsmen rushed to their assembly points. The soldiers in the regular forces refused to obey the orders of their commanders and went over to the side of the people. The revolution in Paris had begun. At first, the proletariat thought only of defence, but the inescapable logic of battle soon forced it to move to the attack. In the afternoon of March 18, the Central Committee of the National Guard assumed command of the rebellion and sent its forces to seize the city's chief strategic points. By now the government forces were completely demoralised, and victory was achieved almost without bloodshed. Late in the evening the rebel forces seized

the city hall and hoisted a red flag over it. Thiers and his generals fled to Versailles. The forces of the regular army were withdrawn to the same place, and government functionaries also made their way there. The Central Committee of the National Guard was now in control of the city. It was the first workers' government in history.

Paris celebrated the victory, which to most seemed complete and final. Only a few thought of the possibility that the civil war might continue. Instead of moving against Versailles to destroy the nest of counter-revolution that had formed there, the Central Committee of the National Guard proclaimed elections to the Paris Commune. The time lost made it possible for the Versailles government to reinforce its positions. This tragic mistake later proved fatal to the proletarian revolution in Paris.

Elections to the Commune were held on March 26. Most of its members represented the interests of the proletariat and the other classes of working people in the city. The largest faction in the Commune was made up of Blanquists and neo-Jacobins. The followers of Blanqui were determined and devoted revolutionaries, but had a poor understanding of the practical means by which the working class could be liberated. The group known as neo-Jacobins were the most consistent representatives of the petty-bourgeois democrats; they were dedicated republicans who continued the traditions of the Jacobins, the left wing of the bourgeois French revolution of the late eighteenth century.

Forty-one members of the International were elected to the Commune. Most of them belonged to one or another branch of the socialist school of Proudhon. The Commune had only two Marxists among its members. The Communards' unity of action was seriously hampered by the ideological diversity among the members of the first proletarian government, which diverted much time and energy to disagreements that could only do

harm in the midst of a civil war.

Five days after the Paris Commune was proclaimed, the Versailles government began military operations against it. They were emboldened to do so only by the support of the ruling circles of the German empire. Bismarck ordered that French soldiers taken prisoner during the Franco-Prussian War be sent to Versailles. The collaboration of the German authorities made it possible for Thiers to bring his army to a strength of 130,000 in a brief time.

For almost all of the time that it existed, the Paris Commune had to wage an unequal struggle for survival, which consumed the greater part of its strength. Thus there is even greater reason for surprise and admiration at what the Commune managed to accomplish along the lines of the social and political restructuring of society.

The proletariat of Paris convincingly demonstrated that it was capable of taking over leadership of the country and deciding questions of significance for the entire nation. In a brief period, and amidst the trying conditions of a civil war, the Communards enacted a series of measures in the interests of the broad masses of the working people. Some of the Commune's decrees pointed future generations of proletarian revolutionaries the way to transforming the existing order according to the principles of the liberation of labour. The main accomplishment of the Communards was the liquidation of the police and bureaucratic apparatus left over from the Second Empire and its replacement with bodies truly representing the people.

The workers of Paris set high examples of proletarian internationalism and anti-militarism. The history of the proletariat's class struggle records their faultless morality, humanity, and heroism.

The first workers' government lasted only seventy-two days. The Communards were unable to hold off the united forces of French and international reaction. Their leadership suffered from serious theoretical errors and

from insufficient consistency in fighting against their enemies. The army of the Versailles government, aided by its great numerical superiority, the collaboration of German troops, and treachery, managed to break into Paris. The Communards put up a heroic resistance, which was particularly strong in the workers' quarters of the city. Some six hundred barricades were erected in the streets, and a number of public buildings were set afire in an attempt to halt the advance of the well-armed Versailles army, but to no avail. The German command perfidiously let Thiers's troops through to the rear of the Communards. The final battles were joined. Two hundred Communards held off the enemy for two hours at the Père-Lachaise cemetery. Most of them died in battle; the rest were taken prisoner and shot. Now a bloodbath began. It had been planned in advance, and was carried out at the orders of Thiers himself and of the command of the Versailles army. All those who had weapons in their hands, who wore military boots, or who were dressed in the uniform of the National Guard were shot. People were killed for a fancied resemblance to any of the Commune's leaders, and for looking askance at the butchers or making an incautious remark about them. Anyone with an Italian or Polish name was executed, because many Poles and Italians had fought on the side of the Communards. Anyone with powder burns on his hands suffered the same fate. In the hospitals, the wounded and the doctors alike were put to death. The leaders of the Commune were hunted like animals. Only in June did the executions without trial cease; the great number of unburied corpses threatened the city with an epidemic. The court trials went on until 1877. All in all, Paris lost some 100,000 of its best sons and daughters; they were shot, condemned to hard labour, sentenced to exile, and compelled to emigrate.

The First International gave its support to the proletarian revolution in Paris from the very beginning. Sections of the International Working Men's Association in Europe and the USA led a movement of solidarity with the first working-class government in history. Numerous meetings in Germany and Belgium, Switzerland and Austria-Hungary, Britain and the USA, and the pages of workers' newspapers proclaimed sympathy with the cause of the Communards. The situation in Paris was discussed by the General Council of the International.

At the session held on the evening of March 28, 1871, Marx suggested that an address be issued to the people of Paris. This suggestion was accepted, and Marx was charged with carrying it out. On April 4, however, Engels, who spoke for Marx in his absence, declared that such an address would be inopportune in the existing conditions. The General Council agreed with this.

Evidently the lack of news from Paris and uncertainty about conditions there would have made it difficult to draw up such a document. Furthermore, the bourgeois and reactionary press had launched a powerful slander campaign against the Commune. One of the fabrications advanced most often was that the Communards were guided in their actions by the General Council of the First International in London, that the events in Paris were part of a far-flung conspiracy of the "Reds". In these circumstances, the appearance of an address to Parisians from the General Council might have played in-

to the hands of the reactionaries.

At the General Council's session on April 18, Marx suggested that an address concerning the general direction of the struggle be distributed among the members of the International. By this time he knew that what he would write was to be a theoretical work generalising from the experience of the new stage in the working-class movement, rather than an address to the people of Paris.

Marx already had at his command a large body of facts about the revolution. He regularly noted everything about events in France that he found in the newspapers to which he had access—mostly British and French organs hostile to the Communards. It was only rarely that the Commune's own publications reached him. Usually they were intercepted by the Versailles forces. By May, Marx's notes filled a thick notebook. Almost all of this material was used in the address.

In the latter part of April and in May, Marx wrote two drafts of *The Civil War in France*, and completed the final version. For the modern reader, the drafts have an independent interest; they help us not only to understand creative process behind Marx's thought, but also to see more deeply into some of the theses of the final version. In working on his drafts, Marx was not constrained by considerations of space, and many of the subjects were developed in more detail, examined and explained more fully. The strict limits on the volume of the address forced him to omit from the final version several theoretically important passages to be found in the drafts.

The last of the Commune's barricades fell on May 28, 1871. It was just two days later, on May 30, that Marx read the final version of the address entitled *The Civil War in France* to the General Council of the First International. The document was approved, and it was decided to publish it.

In the early days of June 1871, a slender pamphlet

of thirty-five pages appeared in an edition of 1,000. This outstanding document of Marxist thought, written in lucid English, organically combined high revolutionary feeling and forceful polemic with precise theoretical analysis.

In accordance with the task in hand, Marx divided *The Civil War in France* into four sections. The first is devoted to the immediate pre-history of the Paris Commune, beginning with the revolution of September 4, 1870, and to the characterisation of the principal enemies of revolutionary Paris. The second details the history of the counter-revolutionary conspiracy against the rebellious French capital and the consequent rising on March 18, 1871. The third section explains the class essence of the Paris Commune as a working-class government expressing the interests of the majority of the city's working people. Here Marx contrasts the Commune with bourgeois government, which had become a hindrance in the path of social progress. In the fourth and final section, he describes the reign of terror brought by the victory of reaction, pays due tribute to the heroism and selflessness of the Communards, and predicts certain victory for forces of the international proletariat in the battles to come.

Marx begins his work with a characterisation of the Government of National Defence. He attributes its rise to power to the rapidity with which events in France developed. Some of the workers' most influential leaders were still in prison. The Prussians were quickly nearing the French capital. The representatives of the big-money bourgeoisie were able to exploit the patriotic fervour of the Parisians in their own interests. It was not for the defence of the Motherland, however, that they wanted power. "Paris," wrote Marx, "was not to be defended without arming its working class... But Paris armed was the Revolution armed. A victory of Paris over the Prussian aggressor would have been a victory of the French workman over the French capitalist and his state para-

sites. In this conflict between national duty and class interest, the Government of National Defence did not hesitate one moment to turn into a Government of National Defection."¹

In his moral portrait of the bourgeois who had come to power, Marx points out the features typical of the bourgeoisie as a class that has become a hindrance in the path of social progress. He shows that Favre, Picard, Thiers, and their like had achieved wealth and influence by dishonest, and often criminal, means. He exposes the bourgeoisie's class egoism. For many of its representatives, the victory of the popular revolution meant not only the end of the prosperity they had achieved, but also a possibility of imprisonment. Those who came to power on September 4, 1870, were inspired with a fierce hatred for the proletariat of Paris by their fear of punishment for the crimes they had committed. They would stop at nothing to retain their predominant position. They betrayed the interests of their own nation, and entered into secret negotiations with the enemy. While publicly swearing to defend Paris, they were covertly preparing to capitulate. Concluding peace with Germany was the prelude to waging war against Paris. The exploiter classes of France were planning to place the main burden of the indemnity of five thousand million francs to be paid to Germany on the country's working people. The revolutionary masses were an obstacle to accomplishing this, and so disarming the rebellious French capital was, as Marx wrote, "the first condition of success".²

Because of the occupation of a considerable part of the country by German troops and the isolation of Paris from the provinces, the forces of reaction were able to win out in the elections to the National Assembly,

¹ *The General Council of the First International, 1870-1871*, p. 357.

² *Ibid.*, p. 366.

the predominantly monarchist make-up of which created well-founded alarm for the future of the republic.

The Thiers government openly provoked the Parisians to an armed uprising. The city was deprived, in practice, of its status as France's capital; the National Assembly pointedly withdrew to Versailles. Republican newspapers were forbidden. Two of the revolutionary leaders most popular among the city's working people, Blanqui and Flourens were sentenced *in absentia* to death. The postponement of payment on promissory notes and for rent, which had been granted to the inhabitants of Paris during the siege, was revoked. Thousands of tradesmen and small shop owners were threatened with ruin. Many working people were faced with the real possibility of being turned out into the streets together with their families.

The reactionaries directed their main thrust against the National Guard of Paris, which was made up mainly of workers. Three hundred thousand armed proletarians, with powerful artillery in their possession, were seen as a grave danger by the French bourgeoisie, and disarming them was the chief objective in the struggle against revolutionary Paris. The Thiers government was preparing for the decisive battle. Former Bonapartist generals were appointed to key posts in the city administration: governor of the city, prefect of police, and commander-in-chief of the National Guard. Troops loyal to the government were brought into Paris.

In the face of the threat of a counter-revolution, the National Guard closed its ranks and perfected its organisation. The conflict came to a head on March 18, when the government tried to seize the National Guard's artillery. Marx clearly shows the falsity of the pretext Thiers offered to justify his action. The Prime Minister asserted that the cannon of the National Guard were government property, when in actual fact, as Marx points out, they had been bought with money collected from the working people of Paris.

The night attack by government troops, Marx writes, marked the actual beginning of the civil war. The events of March 18 ended in victory for the people. "The glorious working men's Revolution ... took undisputed sway of Paris. The Central Committee was its provisional government."¹

Marx calls attention to the fact that the proletariat came to power almost without bloodshed, in striking contrast to the revolutions, and especially the counter-revolutions, of the "better classes".² He shows up the lying fabrications of the bourgeois press, which had sought to frighten the common man with tales of bloody horror about the Paris revolution. Marx showed that the shooting of generals Lecomte and Thomas was a spontaneous expression of the masses' indignation; they were killed by government soldiers who had gone over to the rebels. Marx argues that there was also good reason for the breaking up of the demonstration of Parisian reactionaries by National Guards in Place Vendôme. He proves irrefutably that it was not a peaceful procession of civilians, but a provocative sortie by an armed class enemy. During the disturbance two National Guardsmen were killed, and ten more were gravely wounded. When the enemies of the revolution were put to flight, Marx writes, they left "the whole scene of their exploit strewn with revolvers, daggers, and sword-cases, in evidence of the 'unarmed' character of their 'pacific' demonstration".³

Marx's address points to the sharp contrast between the humanitarian behaviour of the Communards and the savagery of the bourgeoisie. It cites instances, taken from newspaper accounts, of the ruthless punishment meted out to Communards who fell into the hands of the Versailles forces. Marx brings his readers to the

¹ Ibid., p. 370.

² Ibid., p. 371.

³ Ibid., p. 374.

thought that the killing of prisoners without trial or investigation (and the abhorrent sufferings often inflicted on them beforehand) is no exception, but rather the rule for the defenders of the bourgeois order. The Communards' desire to avoid taking life unnecessarily, Marx writes bitterly, and their unwillingness to unleash a civil war, ultimately proved to be a tragic error. He says in his address that "the Central Committee made itself ... guilty of a decisive mistake in not at once marching upon Versailles, then completely helpless, and thus putting an end to the conspiracies of Thiers and his Rurals".¹ Equally ruinous were the inconsistencies of the Commune's leadership in conducting terror against the counter-revolutionaries. As Marx shows, the Commune's decrees on hostages initially had a sobering effect on Thiers and his generals. This decree said that anyone caught in complicity with the Versailles government was to be taken hostage, and that three hostages would be executed for every Communard put to death by the enemy. For a time no more prisoners were shot in Versailles. But when it was perceived that the Communards were slow in carrying out the terrible threats of their decree, the mass killings of Paris's captured defenders were resumed. Marx expresses particular disgust at the way that the Versailles rulers and their press gloated over these atrocities.

In the third section of the address, Marx gives a class analysis of the Commune. Many people of that time (including both friends and enemies of the Communards) could see that the March 18 revolution was accomplished by the hands of the workers of Paris. Some were even able to perceive the social essence of the Commune's main goals. And it was no secret to the vanguard of the European proletariat or to the most insightful members of the exploiter classes that the working people of Paris were fighting not only to preserve the republican

¹ Ibid.

form of government, but also to create a republic that would provide conditions for the freeing of labour from exploitation.

Almost no one, however, was able to indicate precisely what was fundamentally new, the thing that the Paris Commune, as the prototype of a future government of the victorious proletariat, manifested in embryonic form. For some, the election of the Commune was a natural reaction against the over-centralisation of Louis Bonaparte's police and bureaucratic government apparatus. For others, it was an echo of the turbulent times of the great bourgeois revolution in France at the end of the eighteenth century. For still others, it almost seemed a rebirth of the struggle waged by the communes of medieval towns for their freedoms and privileges.

It was no easy matter to find the truth amidst this multiplicity of views, especially seeing that the Communards themselves did not always have a clear idea of the direction and significance of their actions. Many of their slogans and proclamations were capable of obscuring matters still further. "It is generally the fate of completely new historical creations," Marx wrote, "to be mistaken for the counterpart of older and even defunct forms of social life, to which they may bear a certain likeness."¹

In the days when the Paris Commune was not yet a matter for the history books, when the streets of the French capital were still strewn with its defenders and the ruins were still smouldering, it was only the perspicacity of genius that could see the proletarian republic just destroyed as a new page in world history, the first herald of a future society of working people.

The point of departure Marx takes for his analysis of the essence of the Paris Commune is a conclusion he arrived at nearly twenty years before the proletarian revolution in Paris. In one of his most important works,

¹ Ibid., p. 384.

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Marx writes that the proletariat cannot fundamentally restructure society simply by making use of the government machinery it inherits from the exploiter classes. It must destroy that machinery and create something fundamentally new to replace it. What would the victorious working class set up in place of the bourgeois government apparatus? It was the Paris Commune that supplied Marx with the answer to this question.

The analysis of bourgeois government and the outline of its history presented in *The Civil War in France* is a brilliant example of materialist dialectics. Marx shows that "the centralised State power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature",¹ came into being as a weapon of the newly emerged bourgeois society in its struggle with feudalism. Thus he admits that the rise and development of the bourgeois state was—objectively speaking—of a progressive character. But the contradictoriness of capitalism as a society of exploitation did not fail to make itself felt here too. The power of the state, "which nascent middle-class society had commenced to elaborate as a means of its own emancipation from feudalism ... full-grown bourgeois society finally transformed into a means for the enslavement of labour by capital".² The Second Empire of Louis Bonaparte represented "the most prostituted and the ultimate form of the State power".³ Marx defined in a single phrase the class essence of that regime, which had pretended to represent the interests of nearly all segments of society. "In reality," he wrote, "it was the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation."⁴

¹ Ibid., p. 374.

² Ibid., p. 381.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 380.

"The direct antithesis to the Empire was the Commune."¹ What did Marx see that was fundamentally new in the organisation and activity of the municipality of Paris elected by the working people of the city through universal suffrage? First of all, that the majority of the Commune's members were either workers or acknowledged representatives of the proletariat. Marx saw another crucial difference between the new order in Paris and the bourgeois government in the organisation of the Commune's work and in the rights and obligations defined for its members. The Commune did away with the division of legislative and executive power typical of bourgeois parliamentarianism, a system that the exploiter classes of capitalist society continue to this day to use for the maximum concealment of the class character of their state. Representative democracy is thus used as a screen to mask the continued existence of a well-regulated and potent government machine, the purpose of which is to defend the interests of the powers that be. The first working-class government, which had appeared in Paris, "was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time".² The Parisians had the right at any moment to demand an account from the representatives they sent to the Commune, and even to recall those who did not justify the trust placed in them by the people. Even today, the members of a bourgeois parliament retain their mandate until the next elections, whether they continue to have the support of the electorate or not. All those who served the new proletarian order, including the members of the government, were paid as skilled workmen; government service was no longer a lucrative sinecure for members of the privileged classes.

Together with the meretricious bourgeois democracy, the victorious proletariat did away with the two main

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 381.

² *Ibid.*, p. 382.

supports of the old regime: the standing army and the police. Marx explained that the replacement of the standing army by the armed masses of the people was dictated by the concrete historical conditions that had come into being on the eve of the March 18 revolution. The victory won by the working people of Paris on that day was in large measure due to the inability of the Thiers government to put sufficient troops in the field against the National Guard of Paris, which included virtually all of the city's inhabitants who were capable of bearing arms. The indisputable superiority of the armed masses was further strengthened by the Commune's decree abolishing the standing army. The demand that such armies be done away with was very popular in the working-class and socialist movement at that time. The proletariat rightly saw bourgeois armies as a force intended to preserve the existing order. It was only the bitter experience of the class struggle (including the tragic fate suffered by the Paris Commune) that made it clear to workers that the armed resistance of the exploiters can be overcome only with the help of a well-organised regular army. But in such cases a standing army is not in opposition to the people, but rather defends its interests.

To destroy the machinery of the material power exercised by the exploiter classes, it was also necessary to abolish the conditions that enslaved the working people spiritually. Marx hailed the Commune's decree separating church and state, and gave special importance to the liberation of education from the influence of the clergy.

The measures the Commune took to abolish the instruments that kept the masses politically and spiritually enslaved were not the invention of its members. Many general-democratic programmes had called for an end to bourgeois bureaucracy and standing armies, to police forces and the domination of the churchmen; the First International also stood for these goals. It was only af-

ter the proletariat of Paris had made these slogans a reality, though, that it became evident what was really at stake: the dismantling of the whole mechanism of the bourgeois state and the attainment of a fundamentally new level of democracy, described by Lenin as directly linked to "overstepping the boundaries of bourgeois society and beginning its socialist reorganisation".¹ It was in this that Marx saw the true social character of the Paris Commune. "It was...", he wrote, "a working-class government, the produce of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour."²

Marx understood full well that in the midst of a civil war, surrounded by enemies, the Commune could do no more in the social sphere than adopt measures meant to "betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people".³ Among the decrees Marx considered as manifesting a socialist direction were the abolition of night shifts in bakeries, the prohibition of arbitrary fines and deductions from workers' pay, and preparations for turning enterprises abandoned by their owners over to workers' associations.⁴ While not overvaluing the significance of these steps towards the socialist restructuring of society, Marx perceived that the common element uniting them was their overt anti-capitalism. "The Commune," he wrote, "intended to abolish that class-property which makes the labour of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators by transforming the means of production, land and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and as-

¹ V. I. Lenin, "The State and Revolution", *Collected Works*, Vol. 25, p. 477.

² *The General Council of the First International. 1870-1871*, p. 386.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 391.

sociated labour."¹

Marx thought it of enormous significance that the Commune was the first revolution "in which the working class was openly acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative".² *The Civil War in France* presents convincing proof that broad segments of the petty bourgeoisie of Paris, and even of the middle bourgeoisie, acknowledged the proletariat's leadership in the revolution. Speaking before the General Council of the First International on April 25, 1871, Marx called the Commune's adoption of measures furthering the interests of these class groups a truly masterly move.³

With a deep faith in the good sense of the proletariat, Marx noted that the workers who had come to power possessed no "ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*". Here Marx is alluding fairly openly to the behaviour of certain anarchist leaders, in particular Bakunin, during the revolutionary actions in Lyons in September of 1870. Instead of organising the workers to defend the power that had fallen into their hands, the anarchist leaders had composed a dismaying appeal that decreed the abolition of government. The time lost thereby hastened the downfall of the Lyons revolution. The working class, Marx wrote, is aware "that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men".⁴

Marx's work showed the ways by which the proletarian revolution could be spread throughout France. Of course he knew quite well that the Parisians' chances

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

² *Ibid.*, p. 388.

³ See *The General Council of the First International. 1870-1871*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

of victory were insignificant, but an analysis of the potential that lay in the Commune was requisite for working out the strategy and tactics to be used by the proletariat in future struggles.

Marx argued that if the rest of the country followed the example of Paris, the Commune could become the organisational nucleus for the entire administrative system of France. He was confident that the dominance of the working class could be ensured in large industrial cities through electing communal self-governments,¹ and hoped that in a little while the urban proletariat would be able to induce producers in rural areas to follow its lead.² It was his opinion that the workers' government had at its disposal all the means to accomplish this: it could free the peasantry from paying the indemnity of five thousand million francs to the Prussians that the French ruling classes had burdened it with, and from conscription. The power of the proletariat would have freed them from "the tyranny of the *garde champêtre*, the gendarme, and the prefect; would have put enlightenment by the schoolmaster in place of stultification by the priest".³ Most important of all, it was only a government of workers that could solve in favour of the peasantry the question of mortgage debt—that is, could liquidate or at least reduce the debts owed to banks and usurers, which hung heavily over small and middle-sized peasant allotments.⁴

This was the answer that the address gave to the question of the proletariat's allies in the revolution, one of the keystones of Marxist theory.

Marx paid special attention to the Commune's internationalism. He saw in the first proletarian revolution an organic unity of the national and the international. "Within sight of the Prussian army," he wrote, "that

had annexed to Germany two French provinces, the Commune annexed to France the working people all over the world."¹ For Marx, the internationalism of the Paris revolution was a natural expression of its proletarian character, a striking contrast to the nationalism and chauvinism of bourgeois society. He saw the internationalist essence of the Commune embodied in the appointment of Leo Frankel, a German (or, more precisely, Hungarian) worker, as minister of labour, and of representatives of the Polish revolutionary movement as commanders at some of the main points in the city's defences. "The Commune," he noted, "admitted all foreigners to the honour of dying for an immortal cause."²

The Civil War in France names the decree on the toppling of the Vendôme Column, a monument to Napoleon's wars of conquest, as proof that the Commune had opened a new era in the history of international relations.³

For Marx, Paris in the hands of its workers represented the exact opposite, morally speaking, of the old society. The proletarian government proved to be the least costly in the history of France. As for the Communards' caution in regard to bourgeois property, Marx thought that it had actually gone too far. The Commune's stringency towards its civil servants was in sharp contrast to the festering corruption of the Second Empire and the Versailles government. The change wrought in the French capital by the flight of the big capitalists, the bureaucrats, and the parasites associated with them was truly astonishing. "No more corpses at the morgue," Marx wrote, "no nocturnal burglaries, scarcely any robberies; in fact, for the first time since the days of February, 1848, the streets of Paris were safe, and that

¹ See *ibid.*, p. 383.

² See *ibid.*, p. 384.

³ See *ibid.*, p. 389.

⁴ See *ibid.*

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 390-91.

² *Ibid.*, p. 301.

³ See *ibid.*, p. 391.

without any police of any kind".¹

Preoccupied with the prospects of building a new and just society, the Parisians, regrettably, underestimated the forces of the old world that opposed them. "Paris," Marx wrote bitterly, was "almost forgetful ... of the cannibals at its gates."²

All the segments and factions of the exploiter classes, laying aside their old quarrels, joined to oppose the first workers' republic. The French bourgeoisie and the ruling elite of the German empire, which not long before had faced one another on the battlefield, were quick to reach an understanding. Marx stressed again and again that without Bismarck's help Thiers would have been wholly unable to put together the army he needed to crush the proletarian revolution in Paris. The armed forces of the Versailles government were largely made up of prisoners of war from the old Bonapartist armies, handed over by the German command. The underhanded role played by Prussia's ruling circles was not confined to this. "Whenever before," Marx asked irately, "has history exhibited the spectacle of a conqueror crowning his victory by turning into, not only the gendarme, but the hired bravo of the conquered government?"³ The perfidy of the German high command was particularly unseemly in view of the fact that Prussia had formally declared its neutrality, and Bismarck offered countless assurances to the European public that German troops would not interfere in France's civil war. The concerted attack on the Commune by all the forces of reaction in Europe made it possible for Marx to arrive at a conclusion of enormous importance for the development of the proletariat's revolutionary theory. "Class-rule is no longer able to disguise itself in a national uniform; the national governments are one as

against the proletariat."¹

Thiers had been able to keep the rebellious French capital from uniting with the movement in the provinces, and Marx saw this as one of the reasons for the downfall of revolutionary Paris. Thiers had stopped at nothing to achieve his purpose. The policies of the Versailles government had combined deceit, cynical lies, and intrigues with savage repression of revolutionary stirrings in the rest of France.

The selfless heroism and nobility of the defenders of Paris emerge from the pages of *The Civil War in France* in striking contrast to the sadism of the enraged bourgeoisie. Marx compares the behaviour of the Versailles government's soldiers to the bloody orgies of the darkest times in the history of ancient Rome. Here is what he sees: "The same wholesale slaughter in cold blood; the same disregard, in massacre, of age and sex; the same system of torturing prisoners; the same proscriptions, but this time of a whole class; the same savage hunt after concealed leaders, lest one might escape; the same denunciations of political and private enemies; the same indifference for the butchery of entire strangers to the feud. There is but this difference, that the Romans had no *mitrailleuses* for the despatch, in the lump, of the proscribed, and that they had not 'the law in their hands' nor on their lips the cry of 'civilisation'."² The vengeance inflicted *en masse* on the vanquished was especially repellent against the background of the frenzy of the bourgeois elite in Paris.

In counterdistinction to the saviours of capitalist society, who had lost all semblance of humanity, the working people of Paris offered an example of self-sacrifice "unequalled in any battle known to history."³ Marx's work exposed the attempts of the exploiter clas-

¹ Ibid., p. 394.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 409.

¹ Ibid., p. 410.

² Ibid., p. 404.

³ Ibid., p. 405.

heart of the working class. Its exterminators history has already nailed to that eternal pillory from which all the prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them".¹

CHAPTER III

The General Council of the First International outlined an extensive programme of measures to popularise the address on *The Civil War in France*. Particular importance was given to distributing it among the proletariat. The price of the pamphlet (sixpence) was reduced by half for members of working-class organisations.

There was a need to keep the bourgeois press from using one of its favourite weapons—silence—against the General Council's address. It was decided that copies should be sent to trade union councils, to the editorial offices of several liberal newspapers, and to leading figures in each of the two principal parties in the British Parliament. The newspapers of the ruling classes soon understood that they would be unable to keep this document of the International Working Men's Association in obscurity. Respected London papers such as *The Times*, *the Telegraph*, and *The Standard* devoted editorials to *The Civil War in France*. They had to acknowledge, albeit through clenched teeth, the "excellent literary style" of Marx's work.¹ Of course, the bourgeois papers furiously assailed the ideas and views promulgated and defended in the address. In the grim atmosphere that hung over Europe after the Paris Commune, the militantly revolutionary tone of *The Civil War in France* and its uncompromising expressions acted on

¹ See *ibid.*, p. 411.

¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On the Paris Commune*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1976, p. 252.

the bourgeoisie in the way a red cloth acts on a bull. Marx wrote to one of his acquaintances: "It /the address/ is making the devil of a noise and I have the honour to be at this moment the best calumniated and the most menaced man of London."¹

Marx participated actively in the newspaper polemics that sprang up around his work. He saw them as a fine opportunity to explain and defend the ideas of the Paris Commune and of the International to the European public at large.

Some of the organs of the bourgeois press tried to call into doubt the address's portrayal of those who had been most brutal and hypocritical in suppressing the Commune, men like Thiers, Favre, Picard, and Ferry. They made their charges against the General Council of the International Working Men's Association, in whose name *The Civil War in France* had been published. In his reply, Marx publicly acknowledged that it was he who had written the pamphlet which was causing such a furore and recommended that his opponents bring suit against him for slander.² He had absolute confidence that no bourgeois newspaper would be able to overturn his scathing assessment of the leading figures in the Versailles government.

By the end of June the first English-language edition of *The Civil War in France* was completely sold out. The General Council decided to put out a second edition of 2,000 copies and to lower the price to twopence. In suggesting that this be done, Marx again stressed the need to circulate the address widely among workers.

Translations of *The Civil War in France* were of great importance in its popularisation. All of the International's organisations, from the General Council to the local sections, took an active part in this work.

¹ *Letters to Dr. Kugelmann by Karl Marx*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1934, p. 126.

² See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On the Paris Commune*, p. 248.

Marx and Engels paid close attention to the preparation of the translations of *The Civil War in France*. Their desire was that each translation reflect not only the original text, but also the specific traits of the working-class movement in the country into whose language it was rendered. This is why some of the translations edited by Marx and Engels depart on occasion from the original. Engels played a very large part in circulating and popularising the address. He not only edited translations of it, but also supervised its delivery to the appropriate presses, gave advice on the manner of its publication and the size of the printing, carried on an extensive correspondence on these questions with leaders of the working-class movement, and publicised the address in proletarian newspapers.

During 1871 and 1872, the address was translated into French, German, Russian, Spanish, Polish, Italian, Danish, Flemish, and Dutch. The first publications of *The Civil War in France* to appear outside England were issued by the working-class press. Marx and Engels placed particular importance on the appearance of the German version. At that time the Social-Democratic Party of Germany and the German proletariat were the vanguard of the whole European working-class movement, exerting a perceptible influence on its development in other countries. For this reason Marx and Engels regarded bringing one of the fundamental documents of scientific revolutionary theory to the attention of the foremost representatives of the German working class as a top priority task. Engels was in direct communication with the editors of *Der Volksstaat*, the central organ of the German Social-Democrats. He also did the work of translating. Engels's translation was sent in instalments to Wilhelm Liebknecht, the paper's editor, who was one of the leaders of the German Social-Democrats and a personal friend of his and Marx's. After the address had appeared in *Der Volksstaat*, the manuscript of the translation was sent off once again, this time to

Switzerland, where it was printed in the magazine *Der Vorbote*, one of the popular organs of the International. By the autumn of 1872, some 11,000 copies of *The Civil War in France* were in print in Germany. Working-class newspapers brought out special impressions. Marx's work not only circulated all through the proletarian press of Europe, but also crossed the Atlantic. Lengthy excerpts from it appeared in American newspapers, and selections were read at a meeting of sections of the International Working Men's Association held in New York in July of 1871.

The Civil War in France left no one indifferent. It evoked a wide range of feelings, from profound admiration to burning hatred. "I have received the address and read it," one of the leading figures in the International wrote to Engels. "It is superbly written."¹ Professor E. S. Beesly, a noted British scholar and bourgeois radical-democrat, called the appearance of *The Civil War in France* the most important event of the year.²

Police agents turned their attention to the address. In a report to the prefect of the Paris police, an informer in Brussels wrote that *The Civil War in France* had been read at a meeting in the headquarters building of the Belgian section of the International. There is no denying that the author of the report had certain powers of understanding. The main purpose of the address, he said, was to explain and justify the actions of the International and particularly of the Paris Commune.³ The agent called his chief's special attention to Marx's characterisation of the Commune as a government of the working class, a product of the struggle between the producing class and the expropriating class, and so on.⁴

¹ *Первы Интернационал и Паризшкая Коммуна. Документы и материалы* (The First International and the Paris Commune. Documents and Materials), Moscow, 1977, p. 522 (in Russian).

² See *ibid.*

³ See *ibid.*, p. 372.

⁴ See *ibid.*

The years to come saw the appearance of new editions of *The Civil War in France* in various languages.

The ideas formulated in the address marked a new step in the development of Marxist theory. It was after the Paris Commune that Marx and Engels gave their teaching on the dictatorship of the proletariat its final form. In numerous works, published over more than twenty years, they had been working towards this conception, which is one of the most important in Marxism. In the Commune, Marx and Engels saw the real embodiment of a dictatorship of the proletariat. Marx did not actually use the term in *The Civil War in France*. He called the Commune "a working-class government".¹ Two months later, however, in a speech on the seventh anniversary of the International given at a special meeting in London, he not only emphasised again that the Commune had embodied "the conquest of the political power of the working classes", but drew from the experience of the Communards a conclusion of far-ranging theoretical importance. He indicated that dictatorship of the proletariat is a necessary condition for the total liquidation of all forms of exploitation.²

There were many reasons why it was imperative to develop, clarify, and popularise the ideas presented in *The Civil War in France*. Even many of Marx's comrades-in-arms were unable to fully grasp the theoretical depth of his work. The enemies of Marxism within the working-class movement (above all the anarchists) tried in every way possible to distort the essence of the address and to weaken its influence on the proletarian masses as far as they were able. The followers of Bakunin vehemently denied the need for a dictatorship of the working class in a socialist revolution. They tried to show that Marx's work was inconsistent, that he had lost his way among

¹ *The General Council of the First International. 1870-1871*, p. 386.

² See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On the Paris Commune*, p. 266.

its contradictions. According to the anarchists, the author of *The Civil War in France* was not sincere in his support for the Communards, which was dictated by his fear of losing his popularity among workers. It was even claimed that Marx had been compelled by such fears to amend some of his fundamental views.

The opportunists who had sprung up within the workers' movement were also frightened by the experience of the Paris Commune. The last third of the nineteenth century was a relatively peaceful period in the development of the proletariat's class struggle. Working-class parties emerged and grew strong in the countries of Europe. In some (Germany, for instance) they became a real social and political force. Social-Democrats now sat in the supreme legislative bodies of a number of capitalist countries. Given these conditions, there were a good many leaders in the European working-class movement who felt disinclined to remember the heroic experience of the Parisian workers and the conclusions Marx had drawn from it. More and more often, they sought to represent the Commune as an example of weak organisation, theoretical immaturity, and the ruinous consequences of pursuing unrealistic goals.

Marx and Engels, in their struggle against these opportunist trends within the working-class movement, persistently instilled the main ideas of *The Civil War in France* into the consciousness of the proletariat's vanguard members. There was a need to help workers understand that the dictatorship of the proletariat was a necessary stage on the way to the revolutionary transformation of society. Engels wrote about this in his well-known work *The Housing Question* (1872). He argued that "every real proletarian party ... has put forward ... the dictatorship of the proletariat as the immediate aim of the struggle".¹ Ignoring this immutable truth,

¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* in three volumes, Vol. 2, p. 356.

Engels thought, would lead to a break with the working-class movement and a rapprochement with petty-bourgeois socialism.¹ Three years later, Marx returned to this idea in his critique of the programme of the German Social-Democrats adopted at the unification congress in Gotha. This document made serious concessions to opportunist views about the development and goals of the working-class movement. Exposing the falsity of hopes that a socialist society could be created within the framework of a bourgeois republic (even if the latter were democratic), Marx wrote: "Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the *revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*."² This, one of the main theses of Marxist theory, is direct development of the conclusions drawn in *The Civil War in France*.

In 1891, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the proclamation of the Paris Commune, a third, commemorative edition of the German version of Marx's work appeared. It included an introduction written by Engels. At a time when the working-class movement was rapidly gathering strength, when the Social-Democratic parties of the developed European countries were winning more and more supporters in the parliamentary elections, Engels thought it opportune to call the attention of his proletarian audience once again to this work by Marx, which he called "half-forgotten".³ Recalling the content of the address of the General Council, Engels supplemented it in several highly important ways. In essence, what he did was to further develop certain of Marx's ideas, making them more concrete and precise by putting them into historical perspective. He gave a

¹ See *ibid.*

² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* in three volumes, Vol. 3, p. 26.

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 179.

brief characterisation of the chief groups represented in the Commune, the Blanquists and the Proudhonists. The first, he said, were "at that time Socialists only by revolutionary, proletarian instinct".¹ The thinking of the second was based on the mistaken and utopian notions of the petty-bourgeois socialist Proudhon. It was reality, however, the practice of revolution, that guided their actions. Engels writes that "in both cases the irony of history willed ... that both did the opposite of what the doctrines of their school prescribed".² This remark is of exceptional importance for the understanding of the organic connection between the Paris Commune and Marxism, of the genuine admiration for the Communards that is evident in *The Civil War in France*. Most of the Commune's leaders had not read Marx and did not share his ideas. But the inescapable logic of the class struggle prompted them to take actions that Marx, guided by his genius, had foretold in many of his works. All attempts to turn aside from the tactical line set out in Marxist theory ended in utter failure and brought nothing but harm to the Communards. This was why the Commune marked the end of several non-Marxist trends within the French working-class movement (and not there alone). Engels develops Marx's idea that the old machinery of government must be broken in the course of a proletarian revolution and stresses that this applies to all forms of exploitative state, including the bourgeois democratic republic. Citing the USA as an example, Engels characterised the class essence of America's much vaunted democracy with astounding accuracy. "...We find here," he wrote, "two great gangs of political speculators, who alternately take possession of the state power and exploit it by the most corrupt means and for the most corrupt ends."³ Engels,

¹ Ibid., p. 186.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 188.

in his introduction, far-sightedly warned German workers against "a superstitious reverence for the state and everything connected with it".¹ He further stated that "in reality ... the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than in the monarchy".² In unmasking the falsity of bourgeois democracy, Engels was not at all setting up an opposition between the dictatorship of the proletariat and the organisation of power in democratic forms. In a work written three months after his introduction to *The Civil War in France*, he called the democratic republic "the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat".³

Engels, writing at a time when opportunism was becoming more and more perceptible within the working-class movement, concluded his introduction to *The Civil War in France* with these celebrated words: "Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat."⁴ This paragraph was aimed against those in the Social-Democratic movement who wanted to root out of the memory of the European working class the militant spirit of *The Civil War in France*.

Attempts to neutralise the revolutionary content of Marxism ended in utter failure. Lenin and his comrades-in-arms came to the defence of Marxist theory and continued its development under new historical conditions.

The Civil War in France occupies a special place

¹ Ibid., p. 189.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 435.

⁴ Frederick Engels, *Introduction to "The Civil War in France"* by Karl Marx, in: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* in three volumes, Vol. 2, p. 189.

among those works by Marx to which Lenin turned most often. Almost throughout his revolutionary career, Lenin carefully studied the conclusions drawn from the experience of the Paris Commune in the address of the General Council of the First International. As early as March of 1904, he used Marx's work in preparing for a lecture on the Paris Commune to be given at an international meeting of émigrés in Geneva.

The first Russian revolution in 1905-1907 sharpened still further Lenin's interest in the ideas formulated in *The Civil War in France*. In 1905, he made a fresh translation of it into Russian, giving the working-class movement in his own country a fitting rendering of one of the fundamental works of Marxism.

While yet another revolutionary crisis in Russia was taking shape, Lenin once again made a careful study of the address of the General Council. At the end of 1916, much of his attention was focussed on solving the problem of the state in Marxist theory. By the beginning of the February revolution of 1917, he had filled the famed "blue notebook" with extracts on this subject. *The Civil War in France* occupies a large place among this material. The outcome of this study was Lenin's brilliant work *The State and Revolution*. The seventh, final chapter, which Lenin had entitled "The Experience of the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1907", remained unfinished. "I was 'interrupted' by a political crisis,"¹ he wrote. Lenin was not disappointed by this experience, however. "It is more pleasant and useful to go through the 'experience of the revolution' than to write about it," he noted in his afterword to the first edition of *The State and Revolution*.²

Lenin highly esteemed *The Civil War in France*. He called it a work which "to this very day serves as the

best guide in the fight for 'heaven' and as a frightful bugbear to the liberal and radical 'swine'".¹ Between the two Russian revolutions of 1917, the February and the October, Lenin returned to the address for the solution of three fundamental problems. First, there was the need to recover from oblivion and bring before the workers the fruits of Marx's genius. Lenin wrote that "now one has to engage in excavations, as it were, in order to bring undistorted Marxism to the knowledge of the mass of the people. The conclusions drawn from the observation of the last great revolution which Marx lived through were forgotten just when the time for the next great proletarian revolutions had arrived".² Lenin understood full well that it was not only, or even mostly, time that had helped to erase one of the fundamental works of Marxist theory from the memory of the proletariat. To a significant extent, this state of affairs had been brought about intentionally by those who were not happy with the revolutionary conclusions Marx had drawn in his work. Lenin held that the changes in public and political life since 1871 were characterised by rapid growth of bureaucratism ("bureaucracy has everywhere soared", as he put it). He saw the greatest danger in Social-Democratic parties infected with opportunism, which had been "by 3/4 grown into a similar bureaucracy".³ "Under capitalism," he wrote, "democracy is restricted, cramped, curtailed, mutilated by all the conditions of wage slavery, and the poverty and misery of the people. This ... is the reason why the functionaries of our political organisations and trade unions are corrupted ... by the conditions of capitalism and

¹ V. I. Lenin, "Preface to the Russian Translation of Karl Marx's Letters to Dr. Kugelmann", *Collected Works*, Vol. 12, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1972, p. 111.

² V. I. Lenin, "The State and Revolution", *Collected Works*, Vol. 25, p. 436.

³ V. I. Lenin, *Marxism on the State*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1984, p. 50.

¹ V. I. Lenin, "The State and Revolution", *Collected Works*, Vol. 25, p. 497.

² See *ibid.*

betray a tendency to become bureaucrats, i.e., privileged persons divorced from the people and standing above the people."¹ The main difference between the reformists and the revolutionaries, Lenin thought, was that the former sought to improve the bureaucratic machinery of the state, while the task of the latter was to destroy it.² It is easy to understand why the reformist leaders of the Social-Democrats were not the least bit inclined to remind the working class of Marx's idea that the bourgeois state machine must be destroyed, a dictatorship of the proletariat established, and so on. Lenin regarded the fight against the opportunists, who attempted to shore up their distortions of Marxist theory with quotations from Marx, as a task of primary importance. "The experience of the Commune," he wrote, "has been not only ignored, but distorted. Far from inculcating in the workers' minds the idea that the time is nearing when they must act to smash the old state machine, replace it by a new one, and in this way make their political rule the foundation for the socialist reorganisation of society, they have actually preached to the masses the very opposite and have depicted the 'conquest of power' in a way that has left thousands of loopholes for opportunism."³ In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin subjected to withering criticism the distortion and vulgarisation by Bernstein and Kautsky, leading figures in the Social-Democratic Party of Germany, of the ideas Marx had expressed in *The Civil War in France*. He clearly revealed the ill intent of Bernstein's attempts to identify Marx's view of the lessons of the Commune with the views of Proudhon, one of the founders of anarchism. Bernstein had claimed that "as far as its political content is concerned", Marx's programme for organising state power on a communal basis "displays, in all

its essential features, the greatest similarity to the federalism of Proudhon".¹ This kind of shuffling disgusted Lenin, but did not surprise him. "...It is no accident," he wrote, "for it never occurs to the opportunist that Marx does not speak here at all about federalism as opposed to centralism, but about smashing the old, bourgeois state machine which exists in all bourgeois countries."² Lenin drew a precise line between the views of the Marxists about the state and the Commune and those of the anarchists. "The former," he wrote, "recognise that after the proletariat has won political power it must completely destroy the old state machine and replace it by a new one consisting of an organisation of the armed workers, after the type of the Commune. The latter ... deny that the revolutionary proletariat should use the state power, they reject its revolutionary dictatorship."³ Lenin used Kautsky as an example of how a Marxist could degenerate into an opportunist. One of the chief indicators of the change was Kautsky's rejection of the revolutionary conclusions Marx drew from the experience of the Paris Commune.

Lenin's book did more than defend the fundamentals of Marxist theory from attempts to revise them. Lenin used Marx's analysis of the Commune as an aid in working out a strategy for the working class in the approaching proletarian revolution in Russia. Like Marx, who had uncovered in the Commune a political form by which it would be possible to bring about the economic liberation of labour, Lenin uncovered in the Soviets the nucleus of the future power of the working people. He pointed out the internal similarities between the Commune and the Soviets. The government of the Parisian proletariat and the bodies created by Russian workers at the time of the revolution of 1905-1907 had

¹ V. I. Lenin, "The State and Revolution", *Collected Works*, Vol. 25, p. 486.

² See *ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 495.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 433.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 489.

much in common. They were the result of the creativity of the masses, which had risen up to overthrow the old order, and embodied their desire to do away with the oppressive machinery of the exploiter classes. Both the Commune and the Soviets of Workers' Deputies marked the first steps in creating a new, proletarian type of state. "...The Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917," Lenin wrote, "in different circumstances and under different conditions, continue the work of the Commune and confirm Marx's brilliant historical analysis."¹

Lenin returned over and over again to the ideas of *The Civil War in France* even after the victory of the October Revolution. Polemicising against Kautsky, who had once and for all gone over to the counter-revolutionaries, Lenin accused him of falsifying Marxist theory. Using *The Civil War in France* as a point of departure, Kautsky tried to depict Marx as an adherent of "pure" democracy, and to place the concepts of dictatorship and democracy, in opposition to one another, ignoring their class essence.

The war of ideas over Marx's outstanding work still goes on today. It intensified after *The Civil War in France* was accorded a place of honour in the theoretical arsenal of the victorious Russian proletariat and its Party. In the 1920s, the opportunists expended no little effort trying to reduce its significance, to make of it no more than yet another of the numerous sources for our understanding of a bygone time. They argued that the address of the General Council had been written in the heat of a fierce fight by an open supporter of one of the two sides, and thus could not claim to be dispassionate and merited no more than critical study.

Bourgeois ideologues continue their furious attacks on the understanding of the Paris Commune that has grown up in Marxist-Leninist theory. The claim that it is based on a "myth of the Commune", among sources

of which *The Civil War in France* is named. It is argued that Marx's main motive in creating this myth was to usurp the inheritance of the Communards and use their popularity among workers for his own selfish interests. The enemies of Marxism try to show that the picture of the Paris Commune that emerges from the address of the General Council of the First International is not in accordance with reality. Modern critics of Marx think that the Paris Commune was not actually a proletarian revolution and did not show a socialist slant. And in no way, they say, can it be regarded as a prototype of the dictatorship of the proletariat. All of that was supposedly invented by Marx, and then seized upon and elaborated by his supporters and followers. Those who make such claims often resort to out-and-out falsifications to support them.

The fierceness of the polemics that continue to rage around *The Civil War in France* shows yet again how important Marx's work is, even today. Efforts continue to be made to neutralise the revolutionary essence of Marxism-Leninism, and the address of the General Council continues to play an important role in the fight to keep it pure, reminding the working class of the imperishable value of the fundamental theses of Marxist theory.

Marx's work continues to have great significance as a model of the creative development of that theory, of its enrichment with the experience of the proletariat's class struggle.

The Civil War in France asserts the necessity of proletarian internationalism as an inalienable quality of socialist revolution and condition for its success. What is meant here is the practical manifestation of internationalism and its role in defending a real, existing government of workers.

The address of the General Council teaches the proletariat the importance of creating a militant proletarian organisation to act as the vanguard of revolution, and

¹ Ibid., p. 437.

shows the significance of the working class's alliance with other segments of the working population.

Marx's work retains a special topicality for those segments of the proletariat and proletarian parties that must wage their struggle under a military or fascist dictatorship or a police and bureaucratic regime that limits bourgeois-democratic freedoms. Many passages in *The Civil War in France* seem to be addressed directly to such groups within the international revolutionary and working-class movement. They are reminders of the hard lessons that the Paris Commune has to teach: that the success of revolution depends on the readiness of society and the proletariat's level of development, that the combined forces of international reaction opposing it represent a grave danger, that revolution must be able to defend itself, that a ruthless struggle must be waged against counter-revolution, in which indecision and hesitation are fatal errors.

At the same time, the address of the General Council strengthens the desire of the proletariat to "storm the heavens", and shows an example of a scientific, class-based approach to the people's revolutionary movement. It fosters in the working-class party an ability to correctly assess the character and prospects of any given proletarian action, a readiness to lead it or to come to its aid not only in the hope of immediate success but also in the long-term interests of the whole revolutionary struggle of the working class. What is more, Marx teaches that in certain cases one can and should risk temporary setbacks, in the face of which courage and organisation must be preserved.

The Civil War in France will live in the memory of the working class as an eternal monument to the Communards, who first laid siege to capitalist society, and as an example of the power, vitality, and currency of genuinely scientific revolutionary thought.

Along with works by Marx, Engels and Lenin, Progress Publishers issues pamphlets devoted to their various writings as guides for students of Marxist-Leninist theory.

In this pamphlet, Soviet historian Nikita Fedorovsky reveals the basic contents of Marx's brilliant work *The Civil War in France*, underlines its major theoretical tenets and shows the objective connection of Marxism with the development of the working-class movement.

ses to hide their crimes behind a thick curtain of lies and slander. Here was an example of what could be expected from capitalism: "In all its bloody triumphs over the self-sacrificing champions of a new and better society, that nefarious civilisation, based upon the enslavement of labour, drowns the moans of its victims in a hue-and-cry of calumny, reverberated by a world-wide echo."¹

In those days, all of the bourgeois and reactionary press was full of malicious and absurd fabrications about the reign of anarchy, murder, and arson that Paris had supposedly suffered under the Communards. The greatest outcry among the hired quill-drivers was provoked by the setting of fires as a means of defending the Commune and by the execution, in the last days of the fighting in May, of a number of hostages—priests, policemen, and gendarmes.

Marx defended unconditionally the right of the Communards to regard fire as a weapon in the struggle against the superior forces of the enemy. He presented irrefutable examples showing that the bourgeoisie, while hypocritically condemning the soldiers of the Commune for burning public buildings, had unscrupulously and needlessly consigned to the flames not only outstanding architectural monuments, but even whole towns. Marx emphasised especially that the same people who were lamenting the destruction of a few palaces and mansions had looked on complacently on the wholesale massacre of captives after the battle.²

Marx's address proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that it was not the Communards, but rather the Versailles government, that was actually responsible for the execution of the hostages. He shows that it was only in answer to the bourgeoisie's brutal practice of shooting war prisoners that the Commune had seized hostages.

¹ Ibid., p. 405.

² See *The General Council of the First International. 1870-1871*, p. 406.

By continuing their mass executions of captured Communards, the government forces provoked the defenders of Paris into taking retaliatory measures. The Commune repeatedly offered to give up Darboy, the archbishop of Paris, and the other priests among its hostages in exchange for Blanqui, who had fallen into the hands of the Versailles government. Marx argued that it was Thiers, who persisted in rejecting these offers, that was the real murderer of the archbishop.¹

International reaction, which had closed ranks in the face of the first proletarian revolution, launched a furious slander campaign against the First International, which was represented to the horrified man in the street, as Marx says, "in the manner of secret conspiracy, its central body ordering, from time to time, explosions in different countries."²

One of the main lessons for the international proletariat to be drawn from the Commune was the realisations that there can be no reconciling the interests of the exploiters and the exploited. "After Whit-Sunday, 1871, there can be neither peace nor truce possible between the working men of France and the appropriators of their produce,"³ Marx states in his address. He had no doubt about who would ultimately be the victor: "...The French working class," Marx wrote, "is only the advanced guard of the modern proletariat."⁴

The concluding lines of the address are a requiem for the heroic Communards, and an angry condemnation of their butchers. With the foresight of genius, Marx predicted that "working men's Paris, with its Commune, will be for ever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great

¹ See *ibid.*, p. 408.

² *Ibid.*, p. 411.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 410.

⁴ *Ibid.*

N. FEDOROVSKY

MARX'S
"CIVIL WAR IN FRANCE"



PROGRESS PUBLISHERS